



AN APPRAISAL AND VINDICATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL SKEPTICISM

Ajay Jaiswal

Research Scholar, Center for Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

ABSTRACT

With the traditional types of skepticism universally attacked and condemned, we are all familiar. The self-contradictory character of negative skepticism, detected in the assertion that 'there is no truth' is commonly assumed as sufficient to demonstrate its deadly fate. The self-contradiction is obvious and undeniable, but it should not be forgotten that the inconsistency visible from outside has not resulted in the demise of this theory. Rather, the value of skepticism has been significantly important to philosophy and science in general.

This paper attempts to rescue skepticism from the charge that it is self-contradictory and infertile by exalting its value in science and philosophy in general, both as positive and fecund. For the sake of clarity, the paper is divided into three parts. First, it would attempt to define skepticism ranging from its extreme to milder forms pointing out the core epistemic problems posited by it; second, it would show how skepticism has been treated as a superfluous enquiry or position in philosophy with special reference to Hume's approach towards it; third and last, it would conclude by pointing out the value of skepticism in philosophy and science where we may discover the proof of its universal applicability.

KEYWORDS: Skepticism, Pyrrhonism, antecedent skepticism, consequent skepticism, dogmatism, discovery, etc.

INTRODUCTION:

To the question what skepticism is, there seems to be no universally accepted definition in the philosophical arena. We often use the terms like 'skeptical' or say 'skepticism' which renders the impression that we understand completely what we mean by these terms, but a closer investigation reveals that the concept of skepticism has been used in a varied and sometimes conflicting sense, and it hints that there is no universally accepted understanding of the meaning of this term. Skepticism, originally in Greek, *skeptikos* stands simply for someone who looks or examines (*skopein/ skeptesthai* and from the PIE root *spek*, i.e., to observe). However, it is an umbrella term that covers under in it a wide variety of methods and attitudes. Accordingly, perhaps a cautious way to begin would be by offering a definition of skepticism as: skepticism is a process or stance of doubting or challenging knowledge claims. Sceptics, dogmatists and academics are alike in the sense that they are searching after something. It is their approaches, expectations, and reactions to the search that divides them.

The natural result of any search for something is that the searchers either find it, or they deny that it can be found and profess its ungraspability (*akatalēpsia*), or they keep on searching (Hankinson, 1995, p. 12). Sextus Empiricus (1990, trans. by R.G. Bury), an ancient Greek philosopher (200 AD), divided philosophers into three groups: those who claim that they have discovered the truth, i.e., the dogmatists; those who claim that the truth cannot be discovered i.e., the Academicians; and those who do not make either of these claims but keep on inquiring i.e., the skeptics or Pyrrhonists.

From the above definition, it is clear that the term 'skepticism' did not originate in a derogatory sense; however, as this notion went through rational scrutiny, it led to several epistemic issues. To grasp this, we may succinctly outline two main forms of skepticism- extreme and local. Now, extreme or radical skepticism is a philosophical position which doubts all knowledge claims which go beyond one's immediate experience, whereas local or limited skepticism doubts knowledge claims within certain domains such as of metaphysics or theology etc. and it may do so with the help of some necessary criteria which a valid knowledge claim must satisfy. Skepticism, however, in any form extreme or mild, posits several fundamental epistemic problems. It questions which of the various human experiences are veridical. Various perceptions coming out of what is presumed to be one object raise the inquiry that which one of them is correct. Experiences of illusions, such as seeing a snake in a rope, force us to rethink the criteria which can distinguish illusions and dreams from reality. The criteria employed are again subject to question, and requiring further justification. How does one know the truthfulness of one set of criteria themselves? By other criteria? This attempt to justify must lead to an infinite regress, or it may stop arbitrarily somewhere. It also questions the truthfulness of self-evident and first principles. Can one be sure of them and assert their infallibility? With such intense questioning, skeptics have posited the basic problems which a seeker of knowledge must tenaciously resolve before he could say that he possesses some knowledge.

With this broad overview of skepticism, we may turn our attention towards some of the critics of skepticism as such with special reference to Hume and also consider possible response/s.

CRITIQUE OF SKEPTICISM:

Critics of skepticism have charged it as being both logical and humanly untenable. If an extreme skeptic holds that there is no truth at all and he doubts or negates all knowledge claims, then how does he recognize that his own assertion is valid? On the other hand, if he is unaware of the evidence for his claims, then his skepticism has no justified basis at all. Accordingly, any pursuit of such skepticism is self-refuting, for it involves in itself some knowledge claims about what is supposed to be uncertain or dubious. This again reflects Sextus' view that a skeptic adopts a stance of 'non-assertion' in general or special sense rather than dogmatizing, affirming or denying anything. He states only what appears to him (Sextus, 1990, Ch. XX).

Other critics have contended that anyone who claimed to be a radical skeptic, suspending or denying all common sense judgments, would ultimately be driven insane. Even David Hume, who pioneered skepticism on the basis of pure empiricism, pointed out the dangers of excessive skepticism. He writes (Hume, 1748, p. 168)–

“For here is the chief and most confounding objection to excessive skepticism, that no durable good can ever result from it while it remains in its full force and vigor. We only ask such a skeptic, *What his meaning is? And what he proposes by all these curious researches?* He is immediately at loss and knows not what to answer.”

However, prior to that, in his *Essays*, in Sec. XII, Hume distinguishes between antecedent skepticism and consequent skepticism both coming in an extreme and a moderate form. Extreme antecedent skepticism is noticed in the Cartesian method where there is a universal application of doubt to beliefs that are not absolutely clear and distinct so as to reach at some self-evident indubitable first principle from where subsequent truths can be deduced. But, to Hume, this is a futile effort as no such first self-evident principle can be obtained which is beyond the realm of doubt, and even if such a principle is found, one cannot deduce a set of other principles from it unless he frees our ability to reason and deduce from doubt. Though Hume thinks that the Cartesian type of extreme antecedent skepticism is untenable, he sanctions some value to it in its moderate form, where it involves setting oneself free from unprejudiced opinions and move towards sound principles, carefully avoiding dogmatism.

The kind of skepticism that Hume follows in his *Essays*, is that of a consequent one where he strictly adheres to the empirical assumptions to its logical extremes. He demolishes all the beliefs and ideas, such as the existence of an external world, God, and self, which go beyond the realm of sensual impressions and ideas. He suggests that we are accustomed in believing in them, but such entities have no corresponding objective foundations. Again, this kind of extreme skepticism may leave us in complete lethargy and inaction. Hume writes (1748, Sec. XII, p. 84)–

“...if his (skeptical's) principles were universally and steadily accepted, all human life would come to an end. All discourse and all action would immediately cease; and men would remain in a total lethargy until their miserable

lives came to an end through lack of food, drink and shelter.”

Again, though this form of extreme skepticism is also highly quixotic, nevertheless, Hume assigns some value to it also in its milder forms, making it both durable and useful. Most people naturally turn to be positively dogmatic regarding their opinions. Seeing only one side of an issue, they neglect the value of arguments of the opposite view. This violent assertion of their dogmatic claims makes them more prejudiced about their opinions and highly intolerable to others. Hume suggests that if such dogmatists become aware of the feebleness of human reasoning and understanding, they would naturally intend to be less dogmatic and arrogant. Hume writes (1748, Sec. XII, p.85)–

“If any of the learned should be temperamentally inclined to pride and obstinacy, a small dose of Pyrrhonism might lessen their pride by showing them that the few advantages they have over other...”

Therefore, Hume suggests that every reasoned man, in every kind of enquiry, must possess some degree of doubt, modesty and caution with the utmost tenderness. The wakefulness from a dogmatic stand with the power of skepticism is clearly visible in Kantian philosophy. Kant writes (1976, p. 8)–

“I openly confess my recollection of David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigation in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction.”

Another way in which the milder skepticism may be valuable to us is in curtailing down our enquiry concerning subjects to which we are capable of dealing in the best way. The imagination of the human mind can lean towards any heights of remote abstractions and speculations, but at the same time, Hume suggests, that there is a faculty of Judgment that forces us to confine to our everyday experiences. This confinement brought about by the skepticism will never allow us to go beyond everyday life, reminding us of our mental imperfections. The task of enquiring about the *beyond* will be exclusive to poets, orators, priests, and politicians. Hume writes (1748, Sec. XII, p.85)–

“Those who are drawn to philosophy will still continue their researches, attracted by the immediate pleasure of this activity and by their realization that philosophical doctrines are nothing but organized and corrected versions of the thoughts of everyday life. But they will never be tempted to go beyond everyday life so long as they bear in mind the imperfection - the narrowness of scope, and the inaccuracy of their own faculties.”

CONCLUSION:

The consequence of such Humean knowledge confined by the force of empiricist skepticism is unique to both philosophy and science. It yields that our speculations about matters of fact regarding whether of science- concerning cause and effect or of religion- concerning God and soul, are never guaranteed with certitude. Nevertheless, it does not encourage us to abandon these disciplines completely; rather we should recognize their limits and understand that we are fallible creatures. We can still work with this mitigated sort of skepticism applying the established body of truth, though at the same time keeping in our mind the sensitivity of it to change in the future. This skeptical outlook, what I think, lies at the heart of the philosophical as well as the scientific method.

If philosophy arises out of wonder, then skepticism is the seed of this wonder. Philosophy with an attitude of questioning the most fundamentals of our lives which are taken for granted, is awkward as well as challenging. This attitude might have cost lives to many philosophers, but this is what cannot be relinquished for any other end. Philosophy may not assure us of the big answers about the human riddles, but certainly, it provides us a set of big questions arising out of doubt and wonder. The entire history of philosophy, more or less, can be seen as a response to the wondrous distress flowing through the two mainstreams of it, viz., ontology and epistemology, which call into doubt or question, the nature of existence and the nature of knowledge of this existence respectively.

In the realm of scientific knowledge, also, the skepticism is valuably fecund. The very method of scientific enquiry, with all its exactness and refinement, issues from the womb of doubt and finally returns to it. The maxim that 'too err is human' in one of the most regulative principles of the scientific method. This is the commonest of all hypotheses that any scientific statement of fact may be proven false later on. It has widely been reaffirmed too. Observation, description, abstraction, and generalization- the vehicles of scientific operation, are often so fictitious and deceptive that to suspect them to be partially erroneous, at the outset, is the chief part of all scientific wisdom. This atmosphere of reserving any statement with suspicion pervades all scientific enquiries. Every scientific statement is under the compulsion of being purged of the suspicion. With this postulate of doubt and suspicion is also associated the instrument of discovery (Barry, 1984). The world studied by science is always supposed to be possible of continued exploration. It assumes that the exploration of the undiscovered is always possible and the new possibilities can be revealed, and our present knowledge may suffer radical revision at any time. The quest for the unknown is in modern science a conscious and systematically planned quest. It assumes that when the known is properly gauged, it may disclose the facts hitherto unknown and obviously unlike the known. With this logic and the principles of suspicion and the

postulate of discovery, skepticism always pushes beyond the horizons of our knowledge.

Thus, on the one hand, where the skepticism saves us from leading to dogmatism, reminding us of our limits of reason and experience, on the other hand, it fosters our assumption that human thinking and the path of discovery is ruthlessly progressive. In this lies the chief merit and value of skepticism.

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